

Climate activism: introduction

Simon Goldhill and Georgie Fitzgibbon

Abstract: The climate emergency has inspired a range of actions, both individual and collective. This issue of the *Journal of the British Academy* contextualises the climate crisis within the COVID-19 pandemic and the lead up to COP26. It asks what climate action looks like at different levels, and how this action can ensure climate justice.

Keywords: Climate change, activism, protest, climate justice, social action.

Notes on the authors:

Simon Goldhill is Professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2016, and currently serves as Foreign Secretary & Vice-President of the British Academy.

Dr Georgie Fitzgibbon is International Policy Adviser at the British Academy.

Climate change poses existential threats to the planetary life support systems on which we all depend. Its effects are already felt profoundly around the world, with those who are already vulnerable and marginalised suffering most. Poverty, inequality, social conflict and displacement are already worsening, and will worsen further, under unchecked climate change. Both science and everyday experience on this are incontrovertible. We have seen high-level global and national policy commitments to address climate change, yet these have failed to produce enough real action. Addressing climate change requires system-level transformations in how we live, consume, produce, use energy and move around. Technologies can help, but at heart these transformations are political. They require a shift in the political-economies that support fossil fuels, forest burning, climate-damaging agriculture and more, and in the politics of knowledge that enable climate change denialism or claims of ‘other priorities’. This is a politics that must extend beyond documents and negotiating chambers to reach the ground, uniting governments, businesses and citizens in alliance for change. This vital climate change politics has sorely lacked momentum, and often been blocked.¹

Usually the idea of climate activism conjures two images – one of the public protest, of people taking to the streets to petition governments or blockading the carbon arteries of our societies, and the other of the concerned citizen weighing up the carbon and financial costs of air travel, plastic use, eating meat and so forth. Yet much of the most effective climate action is to be found elsewhere, in the collective actions of cities, communities, faith-based groups, even businesses and financiers. Often experimental and below the radar, it is in these spaces of hope that much of the power of climate activism is to be found. Equally importantly, climate activism means holding those with the power to make big differences to account – be it government or business, our employers or those who hold our pension funds. Individual action will mean little if the conditions within which we make choices about our everyday lives are not also changed. Taking climate action means we also have to open our imaginations to new kinds of future – read a climate fiction book, watch a climate movie, engage with artists or a local museum to start creating new forms of meaning and identity for a low-carbon good life.²

Individual efforts go only a tiny way towards controlling the menace of climate change. Too few of us will make the effort, and reducing emissions requires big changes in our national infrastructure. Only governments have the resources to control the menace. They can rebuild the infrastructure, and they have powers of taxation and regulation to make everyone reduce their emissions. Although advances in science and technology render zero-emissions electricity grids and prosperous low-emissions

¹ Leach (2019).

² Bulkeley (2019).

economies feasible within this century, such systemic changes will be disruptive and will generate strong opposition from established interests. Political opposition and inertia often thwart even incremental measures such as emissions taxes.³

In the first article in this issue, Ed Wall (2021) asks how art practices can mobilise to create change in ways that empower situated lives and urban landscapes to address the climate crisis. Mary Miss's works can be read as consistently confronting prevailing social and environmental inequities from the ground up. As concerns for sustainability and the climate crisis have become more pronounced Mary Miss has initiated works that defy the singularity of the sculptural objects – what she terms 'monoliths' – to mobilise artists, experts, agencies, residents, and landscapes as 'constellations'. *City as Living Laboratory (CALL)* is the latest phase of Mary Miss's work, a 10-year project that is part framework, part community, part facilitatory network, part installations. As a project of projects, *CALL* aims to bring together artists, scientists, and urban communities to address a range of environmental issues, including the climate crisis, urban equity, and health. Can art suggest future urban practices that can make visible localised environmental challenges while also providing the means to address the climate crisis?

The second article explores the need for urgent climate action through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, and draws parallels with and looks to learn from the ways in which the collective loss experienced as a result of COVID-19 may offer a sense of hope in the fight not just against climate change but for climate justice. Lisa Jones *et al.* (2021) argue that appropriate leadership that guides widespread climate action from all is best sought from those groups already facing the loss of climate change and therefore already engaged in climate-related social action and activism, including youth and Indigenous peoples.

In the third article, Andrew Kythreotis *et al.* (2021) situate climate action in the lead up to COP26. A key aim of much climate activism is to enhance climate ambition and hold local and national governments, as well as global governance fora like the UN, to account for the ways in which they implement and monitor climate policy across society. In recent years new local forms of climate activism, particularly at the urban scale, have taken a more prominent role in holding governments to account. This is particularly true in the UK where climate activism has prompted many local councils to declare climate emergencies whilst providing a mechanism by which they can become accountable in the delivery of their climate action plans. Using interview data with experts working on climate emergency declarations research across the UK, this article discusses four key themes that have underpinned and catalysed the changing geographies and the civil-state relationship within the climate emergency and what

³ Broome (2019).

this may mean for future global climate governance under the UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties (COP). It argues that decision-makers at COP26 need to take greater heed of the significance of this new broader urban climate activism and its role in geopolitically mobilising more equitable, democratic and inclusive forms of climate governance that give citizens and civil society more credence within global climate policy decision-making processes that have been up to now, dominated by national state discourses.

The last contribution draws on similar themes, positioning climate activism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Paula Serafini (2021) defines extractivist violence as the combination of different forms of violence exerted upon territories and upon racialised, gendered peoples (their bodies and their cultures) resulting from, and with the purpose of, perpetuating the extractivist model. It is engrained in the zones of extraction, but its logic extends beyond it. Taking Argentina as starting point of inquiry, the theoretical discussion is followed by discussion of a series of events and phenomena unfolding during the COVID-19 crisis with the aim of demonstrating how the perspective of extractivist violence is useful for arriving at a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the COVID-19 conjuncture. Serafini concludes with a consideration of the ethics of care as a counterpart to extractivist violence, and of the ways that care has underpinned a series of responses to COVID-19.

Finally, in the 'afterword', Marilyn Strathern (2021) reflects on how these four articles open up questions about action and inaction in response to climate crisis. Drawn from different disciplinary domains of work, research and reflection, these papers enhance appreciation of the role of those who take protest -after so many years ineffective years -into the realm of real-time irritation (creating inconvenience) and confrontation (civil disobedience).

This special issue contextualises the climate crisis within the COVID-19 pandemic and the lead up to COP26. It asks what climate action looks like at different levels, and how this action can ensure climate justice. This issue forms part of the British Academy's COP26 series which aims to raise awareness of the importance of the humanities and the social sciences in understanding the complex human and social dimensions to environmental challenges and their solutions. The authors are drawn from a range of Academy programmes, including the *Youth Futures* programme, which aims to bring a youth lens to global sustainable development challenges, *BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants*, which support primary research across the humanities and social sciences, as well as from the Fellowship of the British Academy.

References

- Broome, J. (2019), 'Eight Fellows of the British Academy respond to climate activism tactics' (blog). <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/eight-fellows-british-academy-respond-climate-change-activism-tactics/>
- Bulkeley, H. (2019), 'Eight Fellows of the British Academy respond to climate activism tactics' (blog). <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/eight-fellows-british-academy-respond-climate-change-activism-tactics/>
- Jones, L., Halstead, F., Parsons, K.J., Le, H., Bui, L.T.H., Hackney, C.R. & Parsons, D.R. (2021), '2020-Vision: understanding climate (*in*)action through the emotional lens of loss', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s5): 29–68. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s5.029>
- Kythreotis, A., Howarth, C., Mercer, T.G., Awcock, H. & Jonas, A.E.G. (2021), 'Re-evaluating the changing geographies of climate activism and the state in the post-climate emergency era in the build-up to COP26', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s5): 69–93. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s5.069>
- Leach, M. (2019), 'Eight Fellows of the British Academy respond to climate activism tactics' (blog). <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/eight-fellows-british-academy-respond-climate-change-activism-tactics/>
- Serafini, P. (2021), 'Extractivist violence and the COVID-19 conjuncture', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s5): 95–116. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s5.095>
- Strathern, M. (2021), 'Climate activism: afterword', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s5): 117–121. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s5.117>
- Wall, E. (2021), 'Constellations versus hero: a conversation with Mary Miss', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s5): 7–28. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s5.007>

To cite the article: Simon Goldhill and Georgie Fitzgibbon (2021), 'Climate activism: introduction', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9(s5): 1–5.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s5.001>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

